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SUBJECT: ESTONIAN MPS ON IRAQ AND AFGHANISTAN

¶1. (U) Summary: On September 14, the Ambassador hosted a luncheon discussion of Afghanistan and Iraq with four members of Parliament: Jarno Laur (Social Democrats), Janno Reiljan (People's Union), Ela Tomson (Res Publica) and Ain Seppik (Center Party). The discussion focused on the upcoming debate in Parliament over extension of Estonia's Iraq Mission mandate. The debate reflected the clear trends we have seen in Parliament's position on these key missions - firm support for Afghanistan and division over Iraq. End summary.

¶2. (U) All four MPs reaffirmed Parliament's strong support for Estonia's mission in Afghanistan and highlighted the mission's two-year mandate. They emphasized the importance of the NATO framework for the Afghan mission and said Estonia's participation demonstrates its commitment to being a good NATO ally. Reiljan (People's Union) expressed concern over the prospects for "success" in Afghanistan. Given the tribal culture, lack of democratic traditions, and history, he noted, it will be very difficult to bring together the Afghan peoples. The Ambassador emphasized the need for more NATO troops in Afghanistan emphasized that establishing a secure environment is critical to success.

¶3. (SBU) Discussion on Iraq was significantly less unified. With parliamentary elections next year, all the MPs agreed that extending the Iraq Mission Mandate (which expires at the end of 2006) will be more difficult than it has been in the past. The debate in Parliament is likely to take place in November, Tomson said. Discussions among MPs has not yet started, she added, although there is some talk "in the corridors" on this issue. All of the MPs asserted that it will be impossible for Parliament to approve an extension without a new UN mandate.

¶4. (SBU) Seppik (Center) voiced his support for the Iraq mission, while Reiljan and Laur (Social Democrat) noted their concern that coalition efforts in Iraq lacked a finite timeline. "What is the exit strategy?" Laur asked several times. "The [Estonian] Government hasn't given us any indication what our long term plans are in Iraq." Seppik also noted the sensitivity of the term "occupation" in Estonia and said that he did not think the optics concerning coalition forces sit well with the average Estonian. Laur added that the lack of a UN mandate at the start of the war continues to have a negative effect on public opinion in Estonia.

¶5. (SBU) Comment. Although three out of four of these MPs (all but Laur) voted for extension of the Iraq mandate last year, they represent parties that, for the most part, are opposed. How the vote plays out in Parliament will depend significantly on how the issue is presented by the GOE. The Prime Minister has told us on several occasions that he is confident the mandate will be extended, but two of the three parties in the governing coalition are lukewarm at best about the Estonian commitment in Iraq. In the coming weeks we will liaise closely with the GOE on its strategy

for winning the vote in Parliament.

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